

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

BY MISS MYLACK.
CHAPTER XXV.

It was a dead face—not frightful to look at, beautiful rather, as the muscles slowly settled—but dead, quite dead. I laid him down again, still resting his head against my knee, till he gradually stiffened and grew cold.

This was just at moonrise; he had said the moon would rise at two o'clock, and so she did, and struck her first arrowy ray across the plain upon his face—that still face with its half-open mouth and eyes.

I had not been afraid of him hitherto; now I was. It was no longer a man, but a corpse, and I was the murderer.

The sight of the moon rising, is my last recollection of this night. Probably the fit of insanity, which lasted for many months afterward, at that instant came on, and under its influence I must have fled, leaving him where he lay, with the rig standing by, and the horse quietly feeding beside the great stones; but I do not recollect anything. Doubtless, I had all the cunning of madness, for I contrived to gain the coast and get over to France; but how, or when, I have not the slightest remembrance to this day.

As I have told you, I never saw Dallas again. When I reached Pau, he was dead and buried. The particulars of his death were explained to me months afterward by the good cure, who Catholic as he was, had learned to love Dallas like a son, and who watched over me for his sake, during the long, melancholy mania, which, as he thought, resulted from the shock of my brother's death.

Some day I should like you, if possible to see the spot where Dallas is buried—the church-yard of Bilheres, near Pau; but his grave is not within the church-yard, as he being a Protestant, the authorities would not allow it. You will find it just outside the hedge—the headstone placed in the hedge—though the little mound is by this time level with the meadow outside. You know, we Presbyterians have not your English feeling about "consecrated" ground; we believe that "the whole earth is the Lord's," and no human consecration can make it holier than it is, both for the worship of the living, and the interment of the dead. Therefore it does not shock me that the cattle feed, and the grass grows tall over Dallas's body. But I should like the headstone preserved—as it is; for yearly, in different quarters of the globe, I have received letters from the old cure and his successor, concerning it. You are much younger than I, Theodora; after my death I leave this charge to you. You will fulfil it for my sake, I know.

Must I tell you any more? Yes, for now comes what some might say was a crime as heavy as the first one. I do not attempt to extenuate it. I can only say that it has been expiated—such as it was—by twenty miserable years, and that the last expiation is even yet not come. Your father once said, and his words dashed from me the first hope which ever entered my mind concerning you, that he never would clasp the hand of a man who had taken the life of another. What would he say to a man who had taken a life and concealed the fact for twenty years? I am that man.

How it came about, I will tell you.

For a twelvemonth after that night, I was, you will remember, not myself; in truth, a maniac, though a quiet and harmless one. My insanity was of the sullen and taciturn kind, so that I betrayed nothing if indeed I had any remembrance of what had happened, which I believe I had not. The first dawn of recollection came through reading an English newspaper, which the old cure brought to amuse me, an account of a man who was hanged for murder. I read it line by line—the trial—the verdict—the latter days of the criminal—who was a young lad like me—and the last day of all, when he was hanged.

By degrees, first misty as a dream, then ghastly clear, impressed on my mind with a tenacity and minuteness all but miraculous, considering the long blank which followed—came out the events of that night. I became conscious that I too had killed a man, that if any eye had seen the act I should have been taken, tried, and hanged for murder.

Young as I was, and ignorant of English criminal law, I had sufficient common sense to arrive at the conclusion that, as things stood, there was not a fragment of evidence against me, individually, nor, indeed, any clear evidence to show that the man was murdered at all. It was now a year ago—he must have long since been found and buried—probably with little inquiry; they would conclude he had been killed accidentally through his own carelessness, drunken driving. But if I once confessed and delivered myself up to justice, I myself alone knew, and no evidence could ever prove, that it was not a case of wilful murder. I should be hanged—hanged by the neck till I was dead—and my name, our name, Dallas's and mine—blasted forevermore.

The weeks that elapsed after my first recovery of reason were such that, when I hear preachers thunder about the

literal "worm that dieth not, and fire that is never quenched," I could almost smile. Sufficient are the tortments of a spiritual hell.

Sometimes, out of its depths, I felt as if Satan himself had entered my soul, to rouse me into ultimate rebellion. I, a boy not twenty yet, with all my future before me, to lose it through a moment's fury against a man who must have been deprived to the core, a man against whom I had no personal grudge, of whom I knew nothing but his name. Yet must I surrender my life for his—be tried, condemned, publicly disgraced—finally die the death of a dog. I had never been a coward—yet night after night I woke, bathed in a cold sweat of terror, feeling the rope round my neck, and seeing the forty thousand upturned faces—as in the newspaper account of the poor wretch who was hanged.

Remember, I pleaded nothing. I know there are those who would say that the most dishonorable wretch alive was this same man of honor—this Max Urquhart, who carries such a fair reputation; that the only thing I should have done was to go back to England, surrender myself to justice, and take all the consequences of this one act of drunkenness and ungovernable passion. However, I did it not. But my sin—as every sin must—be sure—has found me out.

Theodora it is hardly eight hours since your innocent arms were round my neck and your kisses on my cheeks—and now! Well, it will be ever soon. However I have lived, I shall not die a hypocrite.

I do not attempt to retrace the course of reasoning by which I persuaded myself to act the way I did. I was only a boy; this long sleep of mind had re-established my bodily health—life and youth were strong within me; also the hope of honor, the dread of shame. Yet sometimes conscience struggled so fiercely with all these, that I was half tempted to a medium course, the coward's last escape—suicide.

You must remember religion was wanting in me—and Dallas was dead. Nay, I had for the time already forgotten him.

One day, when, driven distracted by my doubts, I had almost made up my mind to end them in the one sharp easy way I have spoken of, while putting my brother's papers in order, I found his Bible. Underneath his name he had written—and the date was that of the last day of his life—my name. I looked at it, as we look at a handwriting long familiar, till of a sudden we remember that the hand is cold, that no earthly power can ever reproduce of this known writing a single line. Child, did you ever know—no, you never could have known—that total desolation, that helpless craving for the dead who return no more.

After I grew calmer, I did the only thing which seemed to bring me a little nearer to Dallas—I read in his Bible. The chapter I opened at was so remarkable, that at first I recoiled as if it had been my brother—he who, being now a spirit, might, for all I could tell, have a spirit's knowledge of all things—speaking to me out of the invisible world. The chapter was Ezekiel xvii., and among other verses were these:

"When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive.

"Because he considereth and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

"For I have no pleasure in him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves and live ye."

I turned and lived. I resolved to give a life—my own—for the life which I had taken; to devote it wholly to the saving of their lives; and at its close, when I had built a good name, and shown openly that after any crime a man might recover himself, repent, and atone, I meant to pay the full price of the sin of my youth, and openly to acknowledge before the world. How far I was right or wrong in this decision I cannot tell—perhaps no human judgment ever can tell. I simply state what I then resolved, and have never swerved from—till I saw you.

Of necessity, with this ultimate confession ever before me, all the pleasures of life, and all its closest ties—friendship, love, marriage—were not to be thought of. I set them aside as impossible. To me, life could never be enjoyment, but simply atonement.

My subsequent history you are acquainted with—how, after the needful term of medical study in Britain (I chose Dublin as being the place where I was utterly a stranger, and remained there till my four years ended), I went as an army surgeon half over the world. The first time I ever set foot in England again was not many weeks before I saw, in the ball-room of the Cedars, that sweet little face of yours. The same face in which two days ago, I read the look of love which stirs a man's heart to the very core. In a moment it obliterated the resolutions, conflicts, sufferings, of twenty years, and restored me to a man's right and privilege of loving, wooing, marrying. Shall we ever be married?

By the time you read this, if ever you

do read it, that question will have been answered. It can do you no harm if for one little minute I think you as my wife; no longer friend, child, mistress, but my wife.

Think of all that would have been implied by that name. Think of coming home, and of all that home would have been—never humble—to me who never had a home in my whole life! Think of all I would have tried to make it to you. Think of sitting by my fire-side, knowing that you were the only one required to make it happy and bright; that, good, and pleasant, and dear as many others might be—the only absolute necessity to each of us was one another.

Then the years that would have followed, in which we never had to say good-by—in which our two hearts would daily lie open, clear and plain, never to have a doubt or a secret any more.

Then—if we should not always be only two!—think of you as my wife, the mother of my children—

I was unable to conclude this last night. Now I only add a line before going into the town to gain information about—about this person; by whom his body was found, and where buried; with that intent I have already been searching the cathedral burying ground, but there are no sign of graves there—all is smooth green turf, with the dew upon it, glittering like a sheet of diamonds in the bright spring morning.

It reminded me of you, this being your hour for rising, you early bird—your little methodical girl. You may at this moment be out on the terrace, looking up to the hill-top, or down toward your favorite cedar-trees, with that sunny spring morn'g face of yours.

Pray for me, my love, my wife, my Theodora.

I have found his grave at last.

"In memory of Henry Johnston, only son of Reverend William Henry Johnston, of Rockmount Surrey, who met his death by an accident near this town, and was buried here. Born May 19, 1806. Died November 19, 1836."

Farewell, Theodora.

CHAPTER XXVI.
HER STORY.

Many, many weeks—months, indeed, have gone by since I opened this journal. Can I bear the sight of it even now? Yes, I think I can.

I have been sitting ever so long at the open window, in my old attitude, elbow on the sill, only with a difference that seems to come natural now when no one is by. It is such a comfort to sit with my lips on my ring. I asked him to give me a ring, and he did so. Oh, Max! Max!

Great and miserable changes have befallen us, and now Max and I are not going to be married. Penelope's marriage also has been temporarily postponed for the same reason, though I implored her not to tell it to Francis, unless he should make very particular inquiries, or be exceedingly angry at the delay. He was not. Nor did we judge it well to inform Lisabel. Therefore, papa, Penelope, and I keep our own secret.

Now that it is over, the agony of it smothered up, and all at Rockmount goes on as heretofore. I sometimes wonder do strangers or intimates—Mrs. Granton, for instance—suspect anything? Or is ours, awful as it seems, no special and peculiar lot? Many another family may have its own lamentable secret, the burden of which each member has to bear, and carry in society a cheerful countenance even as this of mine.

Mrs. Granton said yesterday mine was "a cheerful countenance." If so I am glad. Two things only could really have broken my heart—his ceasing to love me and his changing so in himself, not in his circumstances, that I could no longer worthily love him. By "him" I mean, of course, Max—Max Urquhart, my betrothed husband, whom henceforward I can never regard in any other light.

How blue the hills are—how bright the moors! So they ought to be, for it is near midsummer. By this day fortnight—Penelope's marriage-day—we shall have plenty of roses. All the better; I would not like it to be a dull wedding, though so quiet; only the Trehermes and Mrs. Granton as guests, and me for the solitary bridesmaid.

"Your last appearance, I hope, Dora, in that capacity," laughed the dear old lady. "Thrice a bridesmaid, ne'er a bride, which couldn't be thought of, you know. No need to speak—I guess why your wedding isn't talked about—the old story, man's pride and woman's patience. Never mind. Nobody knows, anything but me, and I shall keep a quiet tongue about matter. Least said soonest mended. All will come right soon, when the doctor is a little better off in the world."

I let her suppose so. It is of little moment what she or anybody thinks, so that it is nothing ill of him.

"Thrice a bridesmaid, never a bride." Even so. Yet, would I change lots with our bride Penelope or any other bride? No.

Now that my mind has been settled to its usual level—has had time to view things calmly—to satisfy itself that nothing could have been done different

from what has been done, I may at last be able to detail these events. For both Max's sake and my own, it seems best to do it, unless I could make up my mind to destroy my whole journal. An unfinished record is worse than none. During our lifetimes we shall both preserve our secret; but many a chance brings dark things to light, and I have my Max's honor to guard as well as my own.

This afternoon, papa being out driving, and Penelope gone to town to seek for a maid whom the governor's lady will require to take out with her—they sail a month's hence—I shall seize the opportunity to write down what has befallen Max and me.

My own poor Max! But my lips are on his ring; this hand is as safely kept for him as when he first held it in his breast.

Let me turn back a page and see where it was I left off writing my journal.

I did so, and it was more than I could bear at the time. I have had to take another day for this relation, and even now it is bitter enough to recall the feelings with which I put my pen by, so long ago, waiting for Max to come in "at any minute."

I waited ten days; not unhappily, though the last two were somewhat anxious, but it was simply less anything might have gone wrong with him or his affairs. As for his neglecting or "treating me ill," as Penelope suggested, such a thought never entered my head. How could he treat me ill?—he loved me.

The tenth day, which was the end of the term he had named for his journey, of course, fully expected him. I knew if by any human power it could be managed, I should see him; he never would break his word, I rested on his love as in waking from that long sick swoon I had rested on his breast. I knew he would be tender over me, and not let me suffer one more hour's suspense or pain than he could possibly avoid.

It may here seem strange that I had never asked Max where he was going, nor anything of the business he was going upon. Well, that was his secret, the last secret that was to be between us; so I chose not to interfere with it, but to wait his time. Also, I did not fret much about it, whatever it was. He loved me. People who have been hungry for love, and never had it all their lives, can understand the utterly satisfied contentment of this one feeling—Max loved me.

At dusk, after staying in all day, I went out, partly because Penelope wished it, and partly for health's sake. I never lost a chance of getting strong now. My sister and I walked along silently, each thinking of her own affairs when, at a turn in the road which led not from the camp, but from the moorlands, she cried out, "I do believe there is Dr. Urquhart."

If he had not heard his name, I think he would have passed us without knowing us. And the face that met mine, when he looked up—I never shall forget it to my dying day.

It made me shrink back for a minute, and then I said:

"Oh, Max! have you been ill?"

"I do not know. Yes—Possibly."

"When did you come back?"

"I forget—oh four days ago."

"Were you coming to Rockmount?"

"Rockmount!—oh, no!" He shuddered, and dropped my hand.

"Dr. Urquhart seems in a very uncertain frame of mind," said Penelope, severely from the other side of the road. "We had better leave him. Com' on."

She carried me off almost forcibly. She was exceedingly displeased. Four days, and never to have come or written! She said it was slighting and insulting the family.

"A man, too, of whose antecedents and connections we know nothing. He may be a mere adventurer—a penniless Scotch adventurer. Francis always said he was."

"Francis is—?" But I could not stay to speak of him, or to reply to Penelope's bitter words. All I thought was how to get back to Max, and entreat him to tell what had happened. He would tell me. He loved me. So, without any feeling of "proper pride," as Penelope called it, I writhed myself out of her grasp, ran back to Dr. Urquhart, and took possession of his arm—my arm—which I had a right to.

"Is that you, Theodora?"

"Yes, it is I." And then I said I wanted him to go home with me and tell me what had happened.

"Better not; better go home with your sister."

"I had rather stay here. I mean to stay here."

He stopped, took both my hands, and forced a smile: "You are the determined little lady you always were; but you do not know what you are saying. You had better go home and leave me."

I was sure then some great misery was approaching us. I tried to read it in his face. "Do you—?" did he still love me, I was about to ask, but there was no need. So my answer, too, was brief and plain.

"I never will leave you as long as I live."

Then I ran back to Penelope, and told her I should walk home with Dr. Urquhart; he had something to say to me. She tried anger and authority. Both failed. If we had been summer lovers it might have been different, but now, in his trouble, I seemed to feel Max's right to me and my love, as I had never done before. Penelope might have lectured for everlasting, and I should only have listened, and then gone back to Max's side, as I did.

His arm pressed mine close; he did not say a second time, "Leave me."

"Now, Max, I want to hear."

No answer.

"You know there is something, and we shall never be quite happy till it is told. Say it outright, whatever it is, I shall not mind."

No answer.

"Is it something very terrible?"

"Yes."

"Something that might come between and part us?"

"Yes."

I trembled, though not much, having so strong a belief in the impossibility of parting. Yet there must have been an expression I hardly intended in the cry, "Oh, Max, tell me," for he again stopped suddenly, and seemed to forget himself in looking at and thinking of me.

"Stay, Theodora—you have something to tell me first. Are you better? Have you been growing stronger daily? You are sure?"

"Quite sure. Now—tell me."

He tried to speak once or twice, vainly. At last he said:

"I—I wrote you a letter."

"I never got it."

"No; I did not mean you should until my death. But my mind has changed. You shall have it now. I have carried it about with me, on the chance of meeting you, these four days. I wanted to give it to you—and to look at you. Oh, my child, my child."

After a little while, he gave me the letter, begging me not to open it till I was alone at night.

"And if it should shock you—break your heart?"

"Nothing will break my heart."

"You are right, it is too pure and good. God will not suffer it to be broken. Now, good-by."

For we had reached the gate of Rockmount. It had never struck me before that I had to bid him adieu here, that he did not mean to go in with me to dinner; and when he refused, I felt it very much. His only answer was, for the second time, "that I did not know what I was saying."

It was now nearly dark, and so misty that I could hardly breathe. Dr. Urquhart insisted on my going in immediately, tied my veil close under my chin, and then hastily uttered it—

"Love, do you love me?"

He has told me afterward, he forgot then, for the time being, every circumstance that was likely to part us; everything in the whole world but me. And I trust I was not the only one who felt that it is those alone who, loving as we did, are everything to one another who have most strength to part.

When I came indoors the first person I met was papa, looking quite bright and pleased; and his first question was: "Where is Dr. Urquhart? Penelope said Dr. Urquhart was coming here."

I hardly know what was done during that evening, or whether they blamed Max or not. All my care was how best to keep his secret, and literally to obey him concerning it.

Of course, I never named his letter, nor made any attempt to read it till I had bidden good-night to them all, and smiled at Penelope's grumbling over my long candles and my large fire, "as if I meant to sit up all night." Yes, I had taken all these precautions in a quiet, solemn kind of way, for I did not know what was before me, and I must not fall ill if I could help. I was Max's own personal property.

How cross she was that night, poor Penelope! It was the last time she ever scolded me.

For some things, Penelope has felt this more than any one could, except papa, for she is the only one of us who has a clear recollection of Harry.

Now, his name is written, and I can tell it—the awful secret I learned from Max's letter, which no one except me must ever read.

My Max killed Harry. Not intentionally—when he was out of himself and hardly accountable for what he did; in a passion of boyish fury, roused by great cruelty and wrong; but—he killed him. My brother's death which we believed to be accidental, was by Max's hand.

I write this down calmly, now; but it was awful at the time. I think I must have read on mechanically expecting something sad, and about Harry likewise; I soon guessed that had man at Salisbury must have been poor Harry—but I never guessed anything near the truth till I came to the words "I murdered him."

To suppose one feels a great blow actually at the instant is a mistake—it stuns rather than wounds. Especially when it comes in a letter, read in quiet and alone, as I read Max's letter that night. And—as I remember afterward

seeing in some book, and thinking I was true it was—it is strange how soon a great misery grows familiar. Walking up from the first few minutes of total bewilderment, I seemed to have been aware all these twenty years that my Max killed Harry.

O Harry, my brother, whom I never knew—no more than any stranger in the street, and the faint memory of whom was mixed with an indefinite something of wickedness, anguish, and disgrace to us all, if I felt not as I ought, then or afterward, forgive me. If, though your sister, I thought less of you dead than of my living Max—my poor, poor Max, who had borne this awful burden for twenty years—Harry forgive me!

Well, I knew it—as an absolute fact and certainty—though as one often feels with great personal misfortunes, at first I could not realize it. Gradually I became fully conscious that an overwhelming horror it was, and what a fearful retributive justice had fallen upon papa and us all.

For there were some things I had not myself known till this spring, when Penelope, in the fullness of her heart at leaving us, talked to me a good deal of old childish days, and especially about Harry.

He was a spoiled child. His father never said him nay in anything—never, from the time he sat at the table, in his own ornamental chair, and drank Champagne out of his own particular glass, hissing toasts that were the great amusement of everybody. He never knew what contradiction was till, at nineteen, he fell in love, and wanted to get married, and would have succeeded, for they eloped (as I believe papa and Harry's mother had done), but papa had prevented them in time. The girl, some village lass, but she might have had a heart nevertheless, broke it, and died.

Then Harry went all wrong.

Penelope remembers how, at times, a shabby, dissipated man used to meet us children out walking, and kiss us and the nursery maids all round, saying he was our brother Harry. Also, how he used to lie in wait for papa coming out of church, follow him into his library, where, after fearful scenes of quarrelling, Harry would go way jauntily, laughing to us, and bowing to mamma, who always showed him out and shut the door upon him with a face as white as a sheet.

My sister also remembered papa's being suddenly called away for a day or two, and, on his return, our being all put into mourning, and told that it was for brother Harry, whom we must never speak of any more. And once when she was saying her geography lesson, and wanted to go and ask papa some questions about Stonehenge and Salisbury, mamma stopped her, saying she must take care never to mention these places to papa, for that poor Harry—she called him so now—had died miserably by an accident, and had been buried near Salisbury.

She died the same year, and soon afterward we came to Rockmount, living handsomely upon grandfather's money, and proud that we had already begun to call ourselves Johnstons. Oh me, what wicked falsehoods poor Harry told about his "family." Him we never again named; not one of our neighbors here ever knew that we had a brother.

The first shock over, hour after hour of that long night I sat, trying by any means to recall him to mind, my father's son, my own flesh and blood—at least by the half-blood—to pity him, to feel as I ought concerning his death, and the one that caused it. But do as I would my thoughts went back to Max—as they might have done, even had he not been my own Max, out of deep compassion for one who, not being a premeditated and hardened criminal, had suffered for twenty years the penalty of this single crime.

It was such, I knew. I did not attempt to palliate it, or justify him. Though poor Harry was worthless, and Max is—that he is—that did not alter the question. I believe, even then, I did not disguise from myself the truth—that my Max had committed, not a fault, but an actual crime. But I called him my Max still. It was the only word that saved me, or I might, as he feared, have "broken my heart."

The whole history of that dreadful night, there is no need I should tell to any human being; even Max himself will never know it. God knows it, and that is enough. By my own strength, I never should have kept my life or reason till the morning.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A thoroughly neat woman is never an unchaste one.

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